



27 September 2011

Pain management adoption on Australian sheep farms

Professor Peter Windsor, University of Sydney

Whilst growing up in Wagga in the 50's and 60's, I was confronted by what I later came to think of as the big 4 in sheep welfare concerns in Australia, being footrot, flystrike, mulesing and rubber ring castration. It was clear that all caused considerable pain and suffering to sheep and for too long, these were problems largely ignored. Fortunately we have seen incredible progress in eradication of virulent footrot in NSW in recent years and the efforts of the many producers and LHPA staff and others involved in this program is highly commendable. We don't have to look too far outside the state borders to see the enormous opportunity cost of not engaging in footrot eradication. Flystrike is another story, but is now also becoming a positive tale to tell.

Those raised with treating flyblown sheep have no doubts about the effectiveness of mulesing in providing life-long protection against breech strike. Most rural folk accept the 'no pain no gain' argument that has justified the obvious impact of the 'operation' on lambs. However the images of mulesing on activist websites and in the European press remain a continual challenge for the credibility of the Australian wool industry. We have an enormous challenge to convince international and urban consumers of wool that such 'cruelty' is still a necessity on many Australian farms. But it is now becoming good news.

As community expectations for improved animal welfare have been emerging as a problem, so have solutions. In just over 5 years it appears as we have seen a marked attitudinal change towards pain in livestock. It was generally accepted that ruminant livestock appear to tolerate pain. This was probably more to do with lack of display than perception of pain, presumably as a result of evolutionary protection against predators. In researching pain in ruminants, we have had to use very careful observations to provide measurements of pain



AWGA - News Update

involved in the routine husbandry procedures we subject our animals to. This has been necessary for us to measure how we can ameliorate pain.

However the great leap forward in welfare on our sheep farms has been the widespread adoption of topical anaesthesia (TA). Provided on an APVMA permit for purchase through veterinarians and use as a farmer-applied spray on solution at mulesing, TA acts directly on nerve tissue to block conduction of signals responsible for the sensation of pain, providing significant relief even when the agents are administered at or after the mulesing incision. It has been estimated that over 60% of lambs that were mulesed last year were treated with TA and it looks like this might be up to 70% or more this year. This is a fantastic development as it shows us and the world that many of our producers will pay for better welfare outcomes for their livestock. This has occurred even when there are no direct financial returns involved in adoption of TA as an intervention, although perhaps also motivated by protection of or a perceived market risk is a driver for adoption?

Pain management by TA has become integral to our argument to continue to mules until we are able to breed improved breech conformation that reduces flystrike susceptibility in our merino populations. This is a story we are now sharing with our international consumers and commentators. But how effective is TA for other husbandry procedures? We have published work with castration in lambs, with TA applied into the scrotum at surgical castration providing welfare outcomes that we consider are superior to rubber ring castration. Our work with dehorning in calves and castration in calves and piglets also shows promise. It appears that farmer applied TA has the potential to dramatically reduce the burden of acute animal husbandry related pain in a number of routine livestock husbandry procedures. TA is yet another first for Australian agriculture.

The pain relief provided by TA at mulesing is very significant as in addition to reducing suffering in sheep, this 'technical solution' appears to have empowered producers to take control of the very emotive issue of mulesing. It is impressive how a relatively simple product can progress a complex and divisive issue towards more rational discussion (by most). Hopefully we will eventually see an 'adaptive management solution' emerge where we will no longer need TA for mulesing as flystrike will be minimised by the widespread elimination of breech wrinkle and better management of other risk factors that are important for breech strike control. Until this occurs, I am sure many would agree that if we are to continue with



AWGA - News Update

mulesing for an interim period, then we need TA to be readily available to producers. The TA agents used for pain relief at mulesing have now been gazetted for consideration for registration by APVMA. For those who wish to make a submission to APVMA on this issue, the web link is:

Related Links

http://www.apvma.gov.au/publications/gazette/2011/19/gazette_2011-09-27.php

<http://australianwoolgrowers.com.au/>